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ABSTRACT

This document is a collection of a list of expressions shared by Vietnamese immigrants who have entered the United States. The expressions concern the following topics: names, formality, cultural influences, touching, tact and diplomacy, shared life, open houses, social standards, manual labor, fatalism, and adaptability. (Author/AM)

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EXPRESSIONS SHARED BY VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA

UD 016 217

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EXPRESSIONS SHARED BY VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA

For Americans interested in knowing about Vietnamese people, the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations offers this overview. The expressions quoted here represent Vietnamese individuals who have graciously shared with us their experiences and insights. For some, the culture shock of living in the United States is very current; others we talked with have been here for as many as ten years.

Many of the Vietnamese now entering American communities are familiar with Western ways. Some are educated urban employees or colleagues of French and/or American business people or officials. They may be more Westernized than the people whose expressions appear here, or... they may not.

NAMES

> *"When I am asked my name in this country, I write it; and I use a comma between the first and second names."*

In this instance, the terms "first" and "second" make reference to the Vietnamese order in which names are given. Perhaps the simpliest way to explain this very confusing cultural difference is by example. In Vietnam, a man's full name may be:

Nguyen Trong Thiet (Jones Paul John)

Because there are not many different surnames, a great number of Vietnamese are Nguyens (Joneses). For this reason, a Vietnamese person is properly called by his given name. In this case:

Mr. Thiet (Mr. John)

If the man has a wife, she may, in different situations be called:

Mrs. Thiet (Mrs. John)
or
Mrs. _____ (Mrs. Mary)

Some Vietnamese have adopted the American order of names. References to "first name" or "last name" are not advisable. Even the term "family name" can be misunderstood; some Vietnamese take it to mean the name given to them by their families (i.e., the given name). For recordkeeping, a well placed comma seems a good clarifying tool. In conversation, it is simpliest to ask a Vietnamese person which name he prefers.

Vietnamese names are words for things of beauty (flowers, snow, moon) for women and virtues (wisdom, truth, honor) for men. Children are sometimes given the names of animals as nicknames, to protect them from unfriendly spirits.

The signature of a Vietnamese person may be quite ornate. This practice began with the French use of official seals on documents, and evolved into the addition of many complicated strokes to the name. American bank tellers have been known to question: "Is this your signature?"

FORMALITY

> *"If you ask a Vietnamese child if he would like some candy, he will say 'no' because he has been taught that that is the polite answer. If you do not ask, but just hand him the candy, he will take it and enjoy it."*
>
> *"In Vietnamese tradition, if you invite me to lunch, I should refuse. Then you should insist and I would accept. Here, in this country, I have learned that if someone offers me a cold drink and I refuse, he will believe that I do not want a drink and I will go thirsty."*

The Vietnamese, particularly those with limited exposure to Western ways, practice a formality which is in sharp contrast to California casual. They continue to address Western persons as Mr., Mrs., or Miss until invited to do otherwise. With Vietnamese persons, they may change to terms such as "uncle" and "aunt" which are more familiar and also more respectful of elders. After a short time here, Vietnamese learn that American casualness in addressing persons is not meant as disrespect, but as friendliness.

If you were to thank a Vietnamese person for anything, you would probably be thanked in return. To the Vietnamese, it is strange when "you're welcome" is abbreviated into a "that's o.k.," "uh huh," or "no sweat."

"Dutch treat" invitations are rare among the Vietnamese. Unless the contrary is made quite plain, it is assumed that any suggestion to eat together is an offer to assume the cost. An offer to pay your portion of the bill may offend a Vietnamese host.

Even at informal dinners, the younger and lower status individuals will not begin eating before their elders or "superiors" have begun. They will even invite their "superiors" to begin.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

> *"Vietnamese go to Chinatown to buy groceries or eat in restaurants. Their cooking is similar to ours."*

The thousand-year Chinese rule of Vietnam left its mark ingrained in the Vietnamese people. Confucianist teachings of even temper, just and fair treatment of others, adaptation to the life around, avoidance of exaggeration, respect for elders and worship of ancestors have become part of the Vietnamese character. As one might expect in a culture where ancestors are worshiped, kinship ties are strong, children and particular sons (by whom the names are carried on) are a source of great pride.

In the past, Vietnamese writing was by calligraphy, like Chinese writing. The two languages used many of the same characters (written symbols), but the spoken languages were mutually unintelligible. Even neighboring countries (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand) have no words in common with Vietnamese.

TOUCHING

"I learned that women shake hands with men in America. I told my wife that if an American man offers to shake hands, she should not be embarrassed or think he is being forward. I explained to her that it is customary here."

As with most Asians, physical contact among the Vietnamese is limited to close friends and family, and even then verbal expressions may be preferred. Vietnamese children greet adults by folding their arms across their chests and bowing. Adults traditionally clasped their hands before them and bowed; the higher the hands, the greater the respect shown. Touching the top of a person's head is considered demeaning. Vietnamese women working among Americans sometimes experience great discomfort, even distress, at the casual physical contacts between men and women, such as a touch on the arm to interrupt a conversation, or a hand on the back as they walk through a crowd. Intellectual understanding of this cultural difference is helpful. A conscious effort to refrain from offending is even better.

"In Vietnam, as in some other countries, a man may hold the hand of another man to show friendship. When I came here, I learned that people think you're homosexual if you do that."

In this instance, the Vietnamese changed his conduct when he learned that it was misinterpreted.

TACT/DIPLOMACY

"When I first worked for an American in Vietnam, I had to get used to his directness. For instance, he told me he did not like my being late and that I must not be late any more. I thought he did not like me and I was mad inside myself. A Vietnamese boss would have told me that he looked for me this

morning and guessed I was in the other office when he did not see me. I would have understood what he meant and I would have tried to be on time."

* * * *

"If you are my friend and I need a loan, I will not ask you for it. The Vietnamese way is to let you know my need and give you the chance to offer me the money if you want to. Perhaps I would say, 'Today I should buy my textbooks, but I will have to wait until I have more money.' Then, if you have the money and if you want to lend it to me, you will offer it. If you are Vietnamese, you would not ask me if I want it, because then I would say 'no'. You would hand it to me so I will not be embarrassed."

Vietnamese are very conscious of and protective of the feelings of others. Spoken communications, as illustrated above, may take the form of hinting. Even in situations (Western influenced) where frank discussion is invited, the Vietnamese are inclined to anticipate the reactions of all those present and withhold or moderate negative opinions.

Vietnamese facial expressions are consistently kept calm, even smiling. Some Vietnamese find it much easier to express negative views through the grapevine, or in written form. Written English is often easier for Vietnamese than spoken English. Many Vietnamese have substantial English language vocabularies. Conversation is more difficult because of slang, idioms and accents.

The "small talk" which Americans use to get acquainted is a source of discomfort for most Vietnamese. Vietnamese are not at ease talking about themselves --

what work they do, how long they've been here, where they live. To the Vietnamese, humility is a virtue; to talk about oneself is immodest. If a Vietnamese person wants to know more about another Vietnamese person, he will inquire through a third party.

When writing letters, the traditional Vietnamese person will focus entirely on the recipient and write nothing about himself and his own family. There is a Confucian saying, "I do not grieve that I am not known; I grieve if I do not know others." Vietnamese who have American friends and family have learned that those Americans are interested and sometimes anxious to hear how they have been and what they are doing.

SHARED LIFE

> *"My friends come to visit me any time and I can visit them any time. You see, until recently, there were few telephones in Vietnam and Saigon is not as large as Los Angeles, so we are not used to phoning ahead, we just go."*

This continuous hospitality may suit some American communities and some American personalities. For others, it would be a distinct incovenience. When Vietnamese dine together with friends, it is usually spontaneous - friends are visiting, dinner time comes, and they share whatever is in the house.

> *"My American friend says that when he goes home from work, he wants an hour alone in a quiet room. I don't like to be alone very much. I'm not happy to be alone."*

The usual Vietnamese household includes the extended family - grandparents, adult brothers and sisters, brothers- and sisters-in-law,

perhaps uncles, aunts, or cousins. Those who have an income support those who don't. Material goods, living space and life are shared. The additional people are not considered to be an imposition, they are regarded as emotional security and support, helpers.

OPEN HOUSES

> *"For a long time, I could not get used to living in an apartment here, all closed in. Every day I had to go outside and breathe fresh air."*

Vietnamese homes are usually kept open to the outdoors. During waking hours, the doors to homes (except in very urban settings) usually stand open for both ventilation and visiting. Particularly to the Vietnamese person coming from rural or semi-rural situations, American homes (especially city apartments) are strangely closed up. Securing homes with locks, (precautions which, unfortunately, are necessary), is in strong contrast to rural Vietnamese living.

SOCIAL STANDARDS

> *"There are two seasons in Vietnam: hot and wet, and hot and dry. You see this shirt I'm wearing? It would be too warm to wear in Vietnam. Here I have to wear heavier clothing to be comfortable."*

For some time after their arrival here, Vietnamese tend to feel cold in weather which Americans would consider quite comfortable. Some suffer severely chapped skin in this drier climate. Even on hot and humid days, Vietnamese women are not likely to wear brief summer clothing. To the traditional Vietnamese, revealing clothes are not suitable for ladies.

It is considered unbecoming for a wife to earn more than her husband, or to be employed when he is not.

Marriages, when not arranged by parents, must at least have parental approval. Vietnamese women take great pride in being mothers and homemakers.

In some ways, the Vietnamese hold values which are reminiscent of American standards in earlier times. In other ways, Americans and Vietnamese are different to the point of being in opposition. The Vietnamese can be expected to be polite (by Vietnamese standards) to the people of this host country. Sometimes their politeness will be in the form of adopting American customs as they become aware of them. The greatest wisdom for all concerned is the appreciation of intentions, not the judgement of one culture's actions by another culture's standards.

MANUAL LABOR

"There is a saying in Vietnam: 'I aspire to be a Mandarin.'"

The Mandarin envisioned is a learned high official, dressed in fine robes, seated with arms folded. No Mandarin toils with his hands. Many Vietnamese refugees have found, or may find, that the only jobs open to them are manual or semi-manual. Language barriers, certificating and licensing problems, and the general economic situation all contribute to this. While many Vietnamese here have taken manual jobs and worked hard at them, a cultural bias may be seen in their use of "free" time. It is hard for a Vietnamese person to understand the pleasure an American teacher might take in working on his car, or in stripping layers of paint off an antique chair.

In America, away from the office, the boss can relax and do more as he pleases; but in Vietnam the boss is the boss, anytime and anywhere. If the boss is encountered away from work, he is still accorded all respect and deference which the office would dictate. The boss must live according to his position all the time. He may not go to a simple little restaurant where the food is good; he must go only to first-rate elegant restaurants which suit his station in life.

FATALISM

> *"Vietnamese will struggle to make their lives better if they can. But at a certain point, when they have done everything they can, they will stop struggling and accept their fate peacefully."*

There appear to be widely differing attitudes among Vietnamese with reference to competition, industriousness and fatalism. These differences are sometimes linked (by the Vietnamese) to regional or socio-economic divisions. It is generally agreed, however, that Vietnamese attitudes toward suffering and toward life in general differ significantly from American attitudes. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism influence the Vietnamese toward quietness, rejection of striving, and submission to superiors - influences absent from the usual American experience.

ADAPTABILITY

> *"You know the bamboo? It bends, it does not break. I tell the Vietnamese refugees that they will not be able to live here as they did in Vietnam. They will probably not be able to have jobs here comparable to those*

which they left. For some of them this is hard to accept. But I know that they will accept it, and that they will adjust to life here."

The Vietnamese are proud. That pride, along with their sense of duty to family and their resourcefulness will be used in adjusting to life in a new and different country.

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